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Off the Wall/Voice Mail

Katina Strauch
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Off the Wall

From Your Editor



With this issue, your editor will begin a new feature — it's called the "off the wall" column. This is for general sound offs about things in our world of librarianship. As Neil Armstrong said nearly 23 years ago, "one small step for . . ." [uhm] librarianship . . .

Close Encounters of the Voice Mail Kind by Katina Strauch

It all happened about three years ago. Then my life really got complicated.

Up until then, the only way people had to get hold of me was through the regular U.S. mail, the telephone, or in person. It was all pretty simple. What you saw or heard was what you got and all that.

And then, in 1989, I got the **Telltale Answering Machine**. With the answering machine came the ability of others to leave messages. Life got more complicated.

Then, about a year and a half later came **THE FAX MACHINE**. The FAX MACHINE meant that I could get messages ALL the time and, even better, I could SEND messages all the time. The only thing I needed was a special telephone number, but, not to worry, people soon began writing such numbers on their business cards and some publishers even sold directories of THE FAX NUMBERS. The sky was the limit. Everything got to be copacetic.

All this was NICE, nice indeed. Then — enter the next stage — **ELECTRONIC MAIL** — you've heard of it — BITNET or THE INTERNET or e-mail attached to some local (or unlocal) system that you have access to. With Bitnet or Internet, I was never at peace. When I was sitting calmly in my study working in the quiet of the middle of the night, someone could be COMMUNICATING with me over the ETHER. What was I going to do?

Ahem — however the **ULTIMATE** evil, as far as I'm concerned is **VOICE MAIL** which appeared about the same time as all of this other stuff. One or two companies had it at first. Then it SPREAD like some creeping kudzu. Now EVERYBODY has it. Soon, I

know for sure, my MOTHER will have it. Soon, I won't want EVER to use the telephone. Soon, I will be talking to myself just to see what a REAL human voice sounds like.

Just what is voice mail I want to know? When did it enter into our vocabulary? Who put it there? Why?

Voice mail as far as I can tell is a secretary-saving device. I wonder what the association of American secretaries (AAS?) thinks (or thought) about this? Did they have meetings like we librarians are having now talking about the rise of electronic information and what it meant for their future? Were there articles published about all this stuff? Did they know about voice mail before we did? Did they try to stop it?

Well, if they did, they should be happy to know that I HATE voice mail. And, you know what, I am NOT alone. Since I started this essay I have talked to a LOT of people about voice mail. And I have yet to run into ANYONE who says that he or she likes voice mail. Of course, you never can tell, obviously there must be voice mail aficionados out there. Somewhere.

But as far as I'm concerned, when you encounter voice mail, you enter a Kafkaesque world. In fact, I am truly sorry that Kafka himself isn't alive to put his own interpretation on this new-fangled man/machine phenomenon.

For myself, I'll do my own hatchet job on voice mail. First and foremost, with voice mail, you may have to punch in MANY numbers according to many options. You have to be careful. You may say or do something you don't mean to. You may mess up. Don't worry, voice mail spreads around the GUILT. Second, Ri-

chard Nixon would have loved voice mail. This is because you can press 1 to send your message, press 2 to erase it, press 3 to hear it, or press 4 to alter it. What more can we ask for? Third, with voice mail in place, you may NEVER have to talk to a real person. You may talk the whole time to a CP (a computer person, not to be confused with the current expression, PC, politically correct). In fact, you may never ever talk to the person, place or thing that you are calling. You've heard of Never Never Land? But the bottom line about voice mail is its **IMPERSONAL** nature. Every situation is different, right? Voice mail forces me to be predictable, perfect in every way, to fit in some box that somebody, somewhere decided that I would fit into.

Not to worry. I've just figured it all out. We can all get rid of VOICE MAIL together. All we have to do is go BACK TO THE PAST. Get a rotary dial phone. And use it! That'll fix 'em. ☹

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